

TRANSCULTURAL IDENTITY IN VIKRAM SETH'S FROM HEAVEN LAKE: TRAVELS THROUGH SINKIANG AND TIBET

BUSHRA JAFRI

Research Scholar, Department of Languages (English), Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Integral University, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India

ABSTRACT

T S Eliot in his poem *The Dry Salvages* figuring in the *Four Quartet* says, "Fare forward, travellers! ...You are not the same people who left that station". This statement defines a very major aspect of travelling which involves coming back to one's home place. Foreign lands generally seem to hold a magical temptation for most people. A person goes to foreign land and returns to his native soil with the stories of faraway and exotic lands. Travelling allows a man to discover the 'infinite riches' of the foreign lands. The true traveller looks forward to the future prospects of enriching his future with his past and present experiences. Travel is an age-old process and with the advent of the printing press in the 15th century, people became sharply aware of voyages, adventures and discoveries of new places, people and continent. Travel writing is instrumental in one's understanding of the history and geography of the world. Debbie Lisle in her book *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writings* explicated the early travel writers and their influential writings. Commenting on the role of travelling in human perceptions of the world, she says:

Travel writing shapes and influences the way we understand the world. Historically, our knowledge of the world has come to us, in part, through the famous travel stories of figures like Marco Polo, Magellan and Lawrence of Arabia. In short, we know there are faraway lands on the other side of the world because certain travellers have made journeys there and recorded them in travelogues

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INTRODUCTION

Vikram Seth's *From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet* is an account of his first-hand experiences recorded as a road narrative in the form of a travelogue. The book was published in 1983 following Seth's visit to China for his research work as an exchange student from Stanford University in the U. to Nanjing University in China. He went there as a tourist but his choices and universal curiosity motivated him to become a traveller. He is a cosmopolitan citizen and his understanding of the world is very broad and 'glocally' secular. His travelogue is a widely-read and an acclaimed piece of literature which provides an unbiased, secular and picturesque account of the landscape of China and Tibet. It is considered to be a bridge between the two culturally rich shores i. China and India and it has proved to be a vehicle for the transmission of cultural as well as ideological differences. His travel discourse is open to both the colonial and the cosmopolitan thought process.

Though Seth has tried his hand at almost all the genres of literature very efficiently, the work and the genre which firmly established him as a superb writer is his second work i. his travelogue, *From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet*. The genesis of the book lies in his visit to China and Seth himself informed

his readers in the introduction of the travelogue that:

I am Indian, and lived in China as a student at Nanjing University from 1980 to 1982. In the summer of 1981, I returned home to Delhi via Tibet and Nepal...This book is based on the journal I kept and the photographs I took while I was on the road. (xvii)

Seth's travelogue is a poetic, lyrical and an impressionistic account of the journey he undertook when he had to return to India for the summer vacation in the year 1981. He was on a three-week tour organised by the Nanjing University for its foreign students, defined by Seth as 'a mixed bunch', which is quite suggestive of the fact that China is a popular choice for students from countries like US, Japan and India because of its diplomatic and academic relationship on the global front. These students were on leave from their mother universities and during the holidays were permitted to travel in China. Seth explains this aspect further in the Foreword to the 1990 Edition of the book:

This book is an account of what I saw, thought and felt as I travelled through various parts of the People's Republic of China as a student. It is not intended as a summary of the political or economic situation of that country, although I did occasionally digress into such ruminations in the course of writing the book. (2)

From Heaven Lake is a travel narrative, it is a non-fictional account of his first-hand experiences which he gained while journeying into China's mainland. The book is divided into nineteen chapters. These chapters are titled after the name of the places which came along his route starting from Turfan, Heaven Lake to Kathmandu and Delhi. Each chapter is enriched with the historical, geographical and cultural descriptions of the places through which he passed. The author vividly describes the ideology and psychology of the people whom he had met on the way and graphically highlights what he saw in the post-liberation China. It is said that when somebody is travelling to some place, he must first learn the language of that place. Vikram Seth knows the Chinese language very well and has a special aptitude for entering into others' cultures and making them his own in such a way that he seems to be at the centre of it instead of being on the margins. There is no such thing as dislocation or root lessness to him who, otherwise, always seems to be rooted. JGV Prasad in the Introduction to his book *An Anthology on Vikram Seth* talks about the cosmopolitan character of Seth. In this connection he says:

He is not bothered about the diasporic dislocations or the search for roots – perhaps he doesn't feel dislocated or uprooted. He writes standard international English and writes it very well. He doesn't seem to address any issues that shake the western world or pander to critical theory. He doesn't even write alternative literature, finding Indian genres and taking patriotic positions. He just writes good readable stuff. So where does it leave canon makers? And where does it leave Seth?(15)

Seth went to China for his fieldwork on the economic demographics of seven Chinese villages where, apart from Economics, he also studied History, the Chinese language and classical Chinese poetry. He also visited various Chinese regions where the cultures, architecture and language vary from region to region. Three years stay in China equipped him with such a wealth of experiences that it resulted in the publication of the aforesaid travelogue. He also brought out two collections of poems based on his Chinese experiences i. *The Humble Administrator's Garden* and *Three Chinese Poets*. Both the books were published in 1992.

Seth throughout his journey was unbiased and uncomplaining about the hardships and difficulties of the journey as he chose one of the most difficult and unparalleled routes and modes of the journey. Although the text is convincingly

postcolonial in its existence, it has a clear postmodernist slant as well because the very nature of postmodernism is adjusted in each and every situation. One should cooperate and adjust with tolerance; and throughout the text, the readers experience the humble attitude of the author. He never complains about hunger, the altitude-sickness, the weather, the muddy roads etc. on the contrary he almost enjoys every bit and every second of his journey.

Seth travels through three nations with different cultures and religions; China, Nepal and India, the three independent countries, and also the least explored region of Tibet. During the course of his journey he met many people with different ideologies and problems. His observations are based upon the culture and the need of the region and are totally unbiased and non-ideological. There is now overcast of personal identity of the author, although identity is a basic challenge for postcolonial writers as manifested in the trauma of alienation and exile, the issues of the self and the other, and the nostalgia for home. 'Home' is always the sacred place for the migrant. Devyani Agarwal in her article "Diaspora writings: A Journey through Space and Time" commented on 'Home' as a place of intimate situations, pleasant memories, warmth, protection, security, a private and caring environment. She further elaborates that, "but as a place, home is also not static. They keep on changing. ...Therefore, home is a psychological attachment with the place and it can be transferred and transplanted". (51). For instance when Seth came back to Nanjing University, he quotes: "Returning to Nanjing has for me the flavour of minor homecoming: my room, my friends, familiar sights". (40).

Society is always heterogeneous in nature. Migrated personalities usually suffer from a shattered identity-crisis and a sense of dislocation as they struggle hard to assimilate in a foreign land. In the process of displacement and assimilation, the reconstruction of self becomes increasingly complicated and it gets hard to bridge the gap between the two cultural spaces. The formation of transnational and transcultural identity becomes assiduous. Mary Louis Pratt in her book *Imperial Eyes* discusses this phenomenon in the following words:

Transculturation is the phenomenon of "the contact zones", the social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other often in asymmetrical relation of dominance and subordination—like colonialism, slavery or their aftermath as they are live out across the globe today. (4).

The book *The Americas in Early Modern Political Theory: States of Nature and Aboriginity*...also confirms the aforesaid observation.

Of course this attraction for the exotic, the foreign and unfamiliar existed well before contact with the New World: stories about antipodes and fabulous far away countries were common in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, entertaining myths and other conceptions about strange people living at the margins of the world. (Martens: 80).

The contemporary era on travel writing is more suggestive of the description of exotic places. It is because of the development of the social system, the way of living, the standards of society, the education system, globalization, awareness, understanding, and yearning not only to touch the moon but also to live on it. People want to travel, learn, watch, observe and feel the most developed places in the world. No one wants to visit remote places like Uighur, Gansu, Xian and Tibet. However, Seth is so daring that he visits these places cheerfully with a thirst for knowledge, thereby proving the Bacon's dictum that "travel in the younger sort, is a part of education; in the elder, a part of experience". Thus travelling both teaches and entertains.

Seth is a man of multiple identities as he is not stuck to the established boundary of a definite identity. He reinvents himself as he transcends the field of identities through which the other is constituted. He has moved off the

beaten track and obviously the route he chose was unfamiliar, difficult and stays outside the mechanics of constructing tourist gaze.

In this sense Vikram Seth is a 'real traveller'. He does not travel in order to write a travelogue. He travels for the sake of experience, education, adventure and knowledge. His curiosity for unexplored places and his deep insight into the multicultural milieu of the country present him as a real traveller. The world is a global village or 'Vasudev Kutumbukam' to Seth and post colonialism is superficial to him. Throughout his journey and his meeting with different cultures, he is always ready to understand the prevailing socio-cultural environment and he makes cognizant efforts to bridge the gap between the self and the other. He returned to Nanjing University after the completion of his tour with further plans to return to his home i. to Delhi via Tibet but he didn't reveal his ideas because of the fear that he must be caught and prohibited by Chinese officials who were always doubtful about the whereabouts of the foreigners. His primary goal was to explore the country first-hand. This sense of travel combined with Seth's style and manner is both refreshing and stunning for the readers. They are thrillingly aware of the enthusiasm when he gets ready to return to his homeland through the unexplored way. In this connection he aptly puts it:

For all the enthusiasm with which I am undertaking this journey, I am conscious that I know almost nothing about Tibet. My understanding of what I see will lack the counterpoint of expectation, of a previous comprehension, however fragmentary. I have always wanted to go to Tibet, yet I know this is largely due to glamour surrounding the unknown. About Tibetan religion I know very little: and I have to learn about the climate and geography at first hand. I have no Tibetan friends. A picture of the Potala, Tibetan dancers seen in Darjeeling, an article or two in the newspaper about the Dalai Lama, chance remarks made since my childhood: it is of scraps such as these that my idea of Tibet is composed. And in one sense my purpose is not to travel in Tibet, but merely to pass through it: 'coming home', as I write to my parents, 'by a more interesting route. (41)

Seth was conscious to collect first-hand information about its climate and geography since he had never been to Tibet and had no Tibetan friends. Seth told his readers about the monotony in Tibet even in dress and colour after it became a Chinese Autonomous Region. However, as Seth was preparing to set forth on his journey to Tibet, packing his bag, changing his scratched spectacles, he became nostalgic about the Golden State i. California and San Francisco. He admits his nostalgia and restlessness when he says:

Increasingly of late and particularly when I drink, I find my thoughts drawn into the past rather than impelled into the future. I recall drinking sherry in California and dreaming of my earlier student days in England, where I ate *dalmoth* and dreamed of Delhi. What is the purpose, I wonder, of all this restlessness? I sometimes seem to myself to wander around the world merely accumulating material for future nostalgias. (43)

This eternal emotional state of a rootless traveller finds reflection in the poem 'From a Traveller' from his collection of poems *The Humble Administrator's Garden* where he says:

I realize that I

Go around the world gathering as much

Nostalgia as knowledge, for I can see that no sooner

Will I have moved to an Eccentric State?

Than the whole weight of the Central Kingdom

Will ravage my memory

CONCLUSIONS

His brilliant portrayal of the varied aspects of Tibet is revealed in their view of his book by *The Sunday Telegraph*: "Utterly convincing and unlike other recent accounts of Tibet, revealing...were there a prize for the most engaging and unexpected travel book of the year Vikram Seth should get it". The quotation cited above is a lyrical tribute to the style and mode of Vikram Seth.

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